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# A Reply to Walter Cronkite

Charleston, South Carolina.

**S**TRANGELY, I seem to be on CBS's hit list. First I was attacked by Mike Wallace on CBS Reports on January 23 and then again by Walter Cronkite in his address last month to the National Association of Broadcasters in Dallas, the text of which *The Sun* published. [*"The Westmoreland Mode," Opinion/Commentary, April 16, 1982.*] If fairness is a part of the American system, I ask to be heard.

Mr. Cronkite stated that I told a college

By William C. Westmoreland

audience in Colorado that the news media will have to be censored in any future war involving the United States. I made no such statement to the college audience I addressed in Colorado. I consented to a press conference before that speech at which I responded to reporters' questions about the Vietnam War. In answer to one question, I said that the big lesson we should learn from Vietnam is that this country cannot pursue a war unless the American people are in overwhelming support. I pointed out that during the Vietnam conflict the media played a role in turning public sentiment against the war with numbers of inaccurate and sensationalized stories. I noted that some journalists had their eyes on winning a Pulitzer Prize and sensationalized their stories with that end in view.

Walter Cronkite ought to understand that point very well, since his network, CBS, did much to paint our war effort in negative terms. Mr. Cronkite himself, after having visited Saigon in early February, 1968, where he was briefed on the Tet Offensive, went back home and told his viewers that the Tet Offensive had been a defeat for our side. Mr. Cronkite had been shown during his brief stay in Saigon that

our battlefield enemies had suffered devastating losses in their rash effort to capture control of a number of cities. They were repulsed, and the Viet Cong were never again able to mount a significant sustained military action. It was the North Vietnamese Army that finally conquered the South seven years later, after American troops had been withdrawn.

Nevertheless, some reporters, including Walter Cronkite, converted into a defeat the victory that our men and our Vietnamese allies had won by valor. That was a blow to morale on the home front and it was perplexing to our troops.

I told the few reporters at the press conference in Colorado that Vietnam was the first war we had fought with no censorship, and I said, "Without censorship (in war), things can get terribly confused in the public mind, and when you add that to another first for Vietnam—television—you have an instrument that can paralyze this country, absolutely paralyze it to where the president is unable to do what he thinks is in the national interest."

Actually, I said that I doubted that it would be possible to impose censorship again in time of war, but I added, "When we put men's lives on the line . . . it seems to me to be a time when the devil's advocate role (of the media) should be softened."

Walter Cronkite apparently does not agree with my sentiments, but there are many thoughtful people in this country, including some distinguished journalists, who recognize the seriousness of the problem we face. Michael J. O'Neill, the former editor of the *New York Daily News*, expressed much the same concern in his speech recently to the annual meeting of the American Society of Newspaper Editors.

Mr. O'Neill said that the press had become insensitive and arrogant, allowing its

skepticism about public officials to turn into a hostility that has weakened government's ability to function. He said: "The media have, in short, made a considerable contribution to the disarray in government and therefore have an obligation to help set matters straight." Mr. O'Neill was discussing the harm that irresponsible adversarial reporting can do in peace time. It should be obvious that the damage can be far more serious in time of war.

President Reagan recently said that if the press had behaved in World War II the way it has been covering the conflicts we have been engaged in over the last 20 years, we would have had a revolution. I am not sure that I agree with that. I think it is more likely that the media would have succeeded in so demoralizing the American people that our success in defeating Hitler would have been far more difficult, if at all possible.

Mr. Cronkite's address to the hundreds of broadcasters itself demonstrated the damage that can be done by irresponsible reporting. He discussed the CBS television program that had charged that I had been responsible for concealing vital intelligence information from the American people, Congress and perhaps even the White House during the Vietnam War. Mr. Cronkite said the military had engaged in censorship, and imposed an arbitrary ceiling on enemy strength estimates to create the impression that we were being more successful than was the case. He said to the broadcasters that the result of this was that I was "totally unprepared for the devastating force" with which the enemy struck during the Tet Offensive. He said, "The shock of the massive Communist assault signaled the end of America's part in that war. You could almost say it was lost from that point on."

Note that 14 years later, Mr. Cronkite is still describing Tet as a defeat for our side,

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despite the overwhelming evidence to the contrary. That is inexcusable. Equally inexcusable was the foul and misinformed charge made by CBS that I and my staff had put an arbitrary ceiling on enemy strength estimates to make our performance look better. Professor Walter W. Rostow said in a letter to the *New York Times* about the program: "The conclusion is false; and those who produced the documentary know it is false." One reason they knew it was false was because CBS conducted a three-hour taped interview with Professor Rostow, who was special assistant to President Johnson during the Vietnam War, in which he had demolished the charges that they intended to air on the program. Not one word of the Rostow interview was aired, for the simple reason that it contradicted what CBS wanted the public to believe. The same was true of an interview with George Carver, who was a senior CIA official who had been deeply involved in discussions about order of battle estimates back in 1967. Dr. Carver also told CBS they were way off base. Again, nothing that a senior former official said was used in the program.

Daniel O. Graham, who had been on my intelligence staff as a lieutenant colonel and who later became director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, agreed to be interviewed for the documentary on one condition. He extracted the promise that his statement would be aired making the factual point that the Tet Offensive had demonstrated, if anything, our intelligence estimates had overstated the military strength of the Viet Cong. That promise was not kept. No such statement was included in the program, because it would have undermined the CBS charges.

All of this and more was brought out at a two-hour news conference three days after the CBS attack on me. CBS did not tell its audience of the detailed refutation that

was made at that news conference by Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker, Dr. Carver, General Graham, my former intelligence chief, Lieutenant Phillip Davidson, and several other officers as well as myself. Perhaps that is why Walter Cronkite, speaking on the subject over two months later, was apparently totally ignorant of the fact that the charges made on the CBS program had been exposed as false. Walter Cronkite has not only defended misleading malicious reporting, damaging to me and to the reputation of our military forces, but he has made himself a party to it.

Mr. Cronkite went on in his speech to suggest that the American people are not being told the truth by our government about El Salvador. That is not the way it is. Just as he and other reporters misled the public about the Tet Offensive, and just as Mike Wallace deceived the public by censoring out all the weighty evidence that proved his thesis was wrong, so have some reporters been deceiving the public about El Salvador. Fortunately, 1.4 million Salvadorans demonstrated on election day on March 28 that the reporters who had been telling us that the Salvadoran people hated the government and loved the Communist guerrillas were wrong. Salvadoran voters shouted at the American reporters, "Tell the truth," and "Sell out your own country, not ours." Walter Cronkite seems not have heard them. He showed no sign of recognition that the elections in El Salvador had rendered much of what our reporters had been telling us as "inoperative."

As Michael J. O'Neill has suggested, when the press goes astray, "it has an obligation to help set matters straight," not to distort them further.

*Between 1964 and 1968, General Westmoreland was commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam. He later served as Army chief of staff and is now retired.*